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77

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Experience
Conservative?

By M. E. Bradford



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IS THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE CONSERVATIVE?

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Having recently urged upon my fellow conservatives the necessity for attaching a priority to distinctions and definitions, having in the Intercollegiate Review insisted that such exercises are properly antecedent to all questions of policy, I was obliged to attempt a reflection on this theme when Mr. Hart proposed it to me. Moreover, this place, this institution, devoted as it is to the immediate prudential questions which confront a government, session by session, day by day, is an appropriate setting for my remarks on the American experience read large. For there is no useful prescription to be drawn from that record if it cannot be translated for the here and now--brought forward for application to the ongoing business of the Republic. Therefore I am gratified by both the assignment and the context, and will try to bring the two together according to the canons of rhetoric given to me by my Southern preceptors, men who honored no deracinated truth and tolerated no speech indifferent to the audience for which it was prepared.

A great part of the answer to the question posed by my title can be drawn from the beginnings of the American experience in the first 150 years after the coming of Europeans to the shores of North America. Furthermore, the reason that my response is (with certain qualifications) in the affirmative is because we had such a good start and drew so much momentum from the pattern established here with the creation and development of the various colonial regimes which were antecedent to our composite independence as a nation. Recognition of this pattern as continuing to operate among us to this day is a predicate to my conviction that the original American experience was on the whole conservative in both its essential and accidental properties.

It is fundamental to my understanding of the American heritage that our earliest forefathers, those who settled the country, came here to acquire land and the status of freeholder--distinctions of the first order of importance in the European societies which they left behind them. They sought what the law still calls "real property,"

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recognizing the connection between personal self-respect and such ownership--the impossibility of achieving the status of freeman or citizen without "locating the blood." Professor Bernard Bailyn's recent work in The Peopling of British North America: An Introduction (see pp. 32 ff.) and Voyages to the West has begun to document much of this process, to tell us of the motives of the colonists who came this way in great expectation. In a word, they were, once Americans, determined to be from somewhere--an objective not adequately described by speaking of the commercial spirit of America or a commitment to economic liberty. I so maintain even though Americans did generally prefer free enterprise--once they had their land grants and a political structure which allowed them to protect such holdings. It is to my point that the Swiss, though not at that time rich, had their own domain. This fact was not separable from their status as a nation of freeholders, or from the respect which they enjoyed among the nations.

Another feature of colonial American life which planted among us the proper inertia toward liberty and order, under god and in law, is the failure of a series of English kings to set up among us a peerage, a viceregal court, and a fully established church--an episcopacy. These omissions, combined with the remoteness of final authority and the disposition of the Crown to leave British America to govern itself in all things local (everything apart from imperial economic and foreign policy) have guaranteed that we would not have here the kind of revolution against unearned privilege and violations of conscience that tore European society apart in the 17th and 18th centuries. We were republican long before we were a Republic. In British North America life meant self-defense (the citizen soldier) and work. It subsumed a connection between worth and effort. The gentleman, as we know the social norm and archetype from colonial times, was here no merely decorative creature; instead, he was an honored figure whose lofty status was matched by his function and large responsibility, encouraging the kind of deference which gives to excellence its social utility. Louis B. Wright describes persuasively the respect for energy and application exhibited by the original Virginia aristocracy in his The First Gentlemen of Virginia (1940). And what he says about the Old Dominion before 1800 will apply just as well in Connecticut, South Carolina, or Massachusetts.

The moral and emotional bases for Jacobin ressentiment are not present in such societies--especially when they embody so much in the way of opportunity. Captain Smith told the lazy courtiers at Jamestown that they had a choice of useful labor--or death. In Massachusetts the Dionysian and promiscuous mixture of Christians, Indians, and bears, the borderland culture of the trading post and the uncivilized fringe, was replaced by the authority of Capitan Endicott and the General Court--with the Maypole cut down and (in Hawthorne's story of the event) those capable of reformation brought back to a situation within the bonds of society, where they could join in the adult business of marching "heavenward." Medieval life may have been

properly summarized in the image of a dance. But life in early America was better represented by less festive symbols--such as hunting, planting, and harvest, militia muster, and group prayer.

Finally, because the American colonials grew to embody their own version of a civil order, rooted in an adumbrated version of the English past but without regimentation according to some plan for their political development, it is natural that they have left among their descendants a hostility to the idea of teleocratic government: the kind of government defined by large purposes, not by its way of operating. Managed development (as opposed to "benign neglect") is the idea that helped bring on the American Revolution. After 1763 and the conclusion of the Seven Years War, it was a decision of the Grenville Administration that the North American colonies be governed according to a policy, so that they might sustain some of the costs of defending their borders: that they might serve the interests of Great Britain while serving their own. It was from the first recognized as an innovation, a change in management style and in constitutional arrangements. Patriots saw in it not a legitimate exercise of authority but a first step in a design to repeal most of their inherited freedoms--their "way of life" (see Professor Bailyn's The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution)--binding them "in all cases whatsoever."

The most English feature of this established order (until 1776) was its legalism, its devotion to Constitution and common law, and its dependence on lawyers--men of law, who grew to be numerous and important in the colonies as soon as they were well organized and began to make money. Nothing could be more natural than that, once we lost one Constitution and Bill of Rights through revolution (an act based on elaborate constitutional arguments), we established another Constitution and another Bill of Rights--or rather, several of both--as soon as possible. There is no way of understanding the origins of our fundamental law apart from 18th century English constitutionalism, than which there is no doctrine more conservative.

Add to all of this wholesome patrimony a religious inheritance and my explanation of the conservative influence of our colonial origins is rounded out. We have been a troublesome and unruly people from the beginning, with little respect for legitimate authority and little appreciation for the keeping of right order or public service. We have exhibited a blind faith in technology or commercial ingenuity and in the value of mere mobility, with an indifference to what is providentially given in the human condition which no Christian can contemplate without uneasiness and regret. Too often Americans have said in their hearts, "Sicut eritis dei" ("You shall be as gods"). And as a people we have deceived ourselves in this way from the first, have been too inclined to believe that we can always have what we want. Also, outside of New England, our fathers were a religious people but without much in the way of a clergy or many churches. On the frontier and in the backwater, settlers were prone

to forget the Apostles' Creed and, like their descendants, were religious without the necessary minimum of doctrine.

Professors Robert Bellah, Martin Masty, and Cushing Stout, however, are mistaken about the prevalence of a merely civil theology among early Americans and about the importance of Enlightenment apostasy--a favorite myth of the scholars--in the generation which put its special mark on the future destiny of the nation: in our character as an independent people. Irreligion is spawned in comfort, not in the struggle to survive the frontier. What exploded in the Great Awakening had been there among the people long before, an undercurrent of fierce devotion, a hunger for personal grace dispensed in large draughts and for the communion of saints. For in the great empty spaces they had walked the lonesome valley, been there by themselves, and needed to testify as to their good fortune. Christian faith discouraged in the Fathers the modern tendency to seek salvation in politics, protected a private sphere, and discouraged men from divinizing the state. Moreover that faith has minimized among us for 360 years the influence of the besetting virus of modern politics, the power of envy to make amity almost impossible--has done this by making the most of our lack of a "privileged" class.

Perhaps its generically American influence on the composite self of the Republic has been in sustaining our national disposition to be sanguine. I have been slow to recognize that there was anything conservative about belonging to the party of hope. One of the lessons of the Reagan years is that avoiding the sin of despair with an optimistic conviction that hope and life go together is not the same thing as hard millenarianism and is, furthermore, definitely American--not being so burdened by history that we cannot climb up to the shining city. If we remember what makes despair a sin and an insult to our Creator, we will better understand why American conservatism is often cheerful--and is that way for religious reasons.

Though we conserve its results, the American Revolution was not strictly speaking, a conservative event. We made war against the common blood and we rationalized our decision outrageously. But we came out of the experience committed to distrust remote, arbitrary, and indifferent authority--authority which imposes its agenda on our local affairs. And we also came out with our assorted civic myths intact--the myth of the New Jerusalem so dear to New England, the myth of the New Eden over the hill, the myth of transplantation, of a new Troy in the West--which the South continued to cherish, despite its complicity in putting much of our colonial history (and England with it) behind us. And finally, the myth of the middle states, of the man who can invent himself, which I connect with Philadelphia and the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. All of these myths helped us to preserve more or less intact the momentum which we drew from the colonial experience, and to carry it westward to fill up the land. The West, per se, as opposed to the idea of getting there, had no

corporate myth; and therefore, as our literature tells us, the pre-social, state-of-nature men and women found there they brought to an end as swiftly as they could, in their civilizing labors calling to mind the quip of Gouverneur Morris of New York, the son of the patroon, that if men really wished to enjoy full equality, they should "live alone"...in the forest, "where natural rights are admitted." Or rather, live there, outside the protections of society, until the wolves arrive.

Our version of self-realization has been (unless we get too abstract about it, which is uncharacteristic) what Richard Weaver calls a "social bond individualism"--a freedom which has as its precondition the survival of an anterior social identity. Whatever we have said of the Declaration of Independence, we begin to think socially by assuming that specific rights are determined by an individual's place in the social reality, are measured by that reality and are inseparable from it. Even in Pennsylvania, a community (in colonial times) proud of its chartered independence of Crown influence, when the Proprietor during the Seven Years War refused to pay his share of taxes to defend the lives of people on the frontier, Pennsylvanians were shocked and turned away from their devotion to the family of William Penn, calling for a royal governor. All of our social myths presupposed some version of the corporate life--that man is a social being, fulfilled only in the natural associations built upon common experience, upon the ties of blood and friendship, common enterprises, resistance to common enemies, and a common faith. Since, unlike the European nations, our identity is not part of the order of being and since, fortunately, we are not made one only by devotion to large causes, we are obliged to grow, to develop by stages--the social bond, working upwards, out of local things, communities, neighborhoods, and private associations such as clubs and church congregations; and as the colonial and early national eras provided us with that material, out of history and through law, which in the Constitution we have made into a sovereign.

What I have said thus far explains why I believe that our original American heritage was fundamentally conservative--up through about 1819. Our subsequent departures from that original heritage have been more or less the measure of what is not conservative about American society in our day. Yet the example of our cultural beginnings has continued to retain authority among us, even as we have failed to follow after it, resulting in a dialectic of several alternative Americas with which we are quite familiar.

I cannot on this occasion comment upon how that long and dramatic story may be organized by the question put to us today. We might speak here of our disposition to periodic fits of simplistic moralism, of our national passions for bigness, change, and mobility, or about the earlier dispersal and present decline of the family as an institution--none of it evidence of conservatism, but part of the inheritance of young Americans growing up today. There is nothing

conservative about the throwaway society, about social restlessness and frenetic land speculation, or about the kind of individualism which loses track of its grounding in the belief that each person has an immortal soul. By giving the subject matter a reading slightly more Southern (and more Protestant) I could spin out an alternative construction of the evidence organized in Russell Kirk's The Roots of American Order and Daniel Boorstin's The Americans: The Colonial Experience, The Americans: The National Experience, and The Genius of American Politics--books for which my admiration is a matter of record. It is not a task even for outlining in the compass of a brief address. I reserve it for another time.

But I will speak of one development within the American experience, which at this point in our national history threatens to subvert our particular version of the conservative heritage. From my reaction to alterations in the meaning and authority of equality as a term of honor among us, you will easily infer my reaction to many other changes in the American value system which have occurred within my lifetime.

Equality is the right of any people (the "we" speaking in the Declaration) to expect their government to provide them the protection of law--security for person and property and hope of a future--which notion has been with us from settlement times. Also there is the equality which results when the law is the same for every citizen who comes before it--at least within the limited sphere of its operation--and the kind of equality which results from having no privileged class of people who are to some degree above the law. The latter had resulted in the kind of ex officio equality of which Charles Pinckney spoke in the Great Convention--an equality coincident upon the general availability of free land and the shortage of labor, to say nothing of the institutional arrangements established here by the mother country. This equality is full of opportunity but is not "equal opportunity." The influence on these shores of various European ideologies introduced here since 1789, coupled with the development among us of a distinctive (and alienated) intellectual class, a class which owes its exalted status to being protectors of its vision of equality, has brought us away from being a nation of citizens, de facto, coincidental, "almost" equals before the law, toward the kind of systematic equality of condition which is the necessary precondition of equality of opportunity. (On this process; see my old friend, John East, late Senator from North Carolina.) Even among conservatives this axiomatic passion for equality and equal rights, based on a misunderstanding of our heritage from the Declaration of Independence and from the Christian promise that grace is available to all, threatens to swallow up our reverence for law, responsible character, moral principle, and inherited prescription.

All of us know that it is "disreputable" and explosive, even in a Washington governed by Ronald Reagan, to complain of egalitarianism, except for the strictly economic variety, which we manage to resist.

However, if we continue to commit ourselves to this confusion, not one component of that rich patrimony of which I have spoken can survive. For equality of condition qua equality of opportunity will fill in all the valleys and pull down the hills--create a power which in the name of all good purposes will be enabled in all cases whatsoever to do with us as it will. Those who wish to follow that broad road to Zion (or perdition) may do so. There is a safety and an accommodation with the powers in such choices. You will not be called "insensitive" or "racist" or "cruel." Your position will be respectable (as the enemy defines respectability), but not conservative, as any of our fathers would have understood the word. For we can only do as the Left does if we begin all of our deliberations concerning practice and policy with its fundamental premise in the place of our own.

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